

WINSTON, N.C., 1909—After many weeks, Cal recovered from diphtheria, and the period of quarantine ended at last. A true spirit of celebration filled the Sharps' house.

To the children, the long weeks of being confined to the house and yard seemed longer than they actually were. The young ones had made playhouses under the dining room table and behind the piano. Helen had read the books that had been sent from school to keep from getting too far behind the other children in her grade. She also read aloud to entertain Libby and Moddy while Mother looked after Cal and Jack and kept the house in order.

Because she adored books, Moddy begged for "just one more story." Even though she was too young to attend school, she learned quickly and gathered first when someone had a story to tell or song to sing.

But, on this day, no one was still enough for reading. The house pulsed with activity. Anything with diphtheria germs had to be cleaned or destroyed. All the bedclothes and curtains were taken from the house and washed, and each of the children was busy carrying armfuls of linens down the steps to Aunt Emma who had a fire going under the great wash pot in the backyard.

There Aunt Emma stirred strong smelling lye

soap into scalding water with the handle of an old broom. Nearby stood the wash bench with the tubs filled and ready for the wash.

Aunt Emma was the woman who helped Mother with the laundry on Mondays and Tuesdays. She was so close to their family and such a faithful worker that she had continued to come to their house during the quarantine. All of the children loved her, and, when she told them to go and fetch something for her, they ran to get it.

"Bring those things on down to me," she shouted to the girls as they came through the kitchen door onto the back porch above her. Moddy and Libby took care not to trip over their small bundles, but Cal gathered up his entire bedroll. Rather than drag it down the stairs, he merely pushed it over the railing and let it fall.

"Cal," Aunt Emma yelled to him. "You just walk down those steps like you ought to. I know you've been sick, and mighty sick, I say. But, not now!" She went on cautioning him, "You just about started a fire in all these sheets, dropping them the way you did. We're supposed to wash 'em not burn 'em."

Farther down in the yard, beyond where the chickens were fenced near the barn, Helen was standing with Harry and Alan. She had been watching



Wash tub and clothesline

the boys, sticks in hand, as they poked at the cakes of brimstone they had been using to fumigate the house. Since Harry and Alan were older than the others, Mother had entrusted them with the task of burning the brimstone in the house and removing it after they were finished.

"Let me hold the stick," Helen begged. "I want to see if I can break those cakes open." She had been fascinated as she watched the curls of smoke rise from the brimstone bricks whenever they were poked. The bricks glowed a yellow color, then some blue, and then after a while, the stones gave off no smoke at all. "Let me have a turn!"

"No, don't play with hot stones. You could get burned," Harry warned

her.

From the corner of her eye, Helen watched her brothers. Finally, when they were looking away toward the barn, she reached down and picked up one of the cakes. The cake was blazing hot. No one saw her drop the cake into the pocket of her dress and quickly turned away.

She started across the yard, intending to go through the gate to the front

yard where she could look at the brimstone. But the gate wouldn't open. The latch seemed stuck. Then she thought she would run up the back stairs and go through the house to the front, but she could not. She felt a terrible burning on her stomach, and suddenly her dress was on fire. She grabbed at it and screamed, while Aunt Emma ran and lifted her in her arms.

"Mrs. Sharp, come quick, this baby's on fire!" Aunt Emma seemed to hold Helen too close. Why wouldn't she let her go? And why didn't she stop the fire? Helen screamed and cried, while Aunt Emma held her tight.

Mother came flying down the steps. In one big swoop she grabbed Helen, spreading her wide walking skirt and wrapping it around her. The fire ate its way up under Helen's arm. She cried, and mother rocked her and moaned. "Oh, my girl, my girl. Whatever has happened to my beautiful girl?"

Now Aunt Emma threw herself, half running, half falling, up the steps to the back porch railing where

she had hung a big rug that she and Sis Nan had just washed and put there to dry. Aunt Emma pulled and heaved and somehow dragged the rug to where she and Mother could roll Helen in it.

When the flames were finally smothered, they gently unrolled Helen from the heavy rug. She lay there, charred and burned badly. Once again Dr. Fearrington was called to the home.

next chapter—Helen feels better

Adapted and reprinted with permission. Written by Helen Marley based on her mother's stories; illustrated by Thorne Worley. Provided by the N.C. Press Foundation, Newspapers in Education.

ACTIVITY: Is "brimstone" an unfamiliar word? First, use context clues and then dictionaries to understand the word.

Select unfamiliar words from news stories and use context clues, class discussions and online dictionaries to learn more about the words.

HISTORY: In the 1930s, the first automatic washing machine appeared, reducing the time and effort required to do laundry.